

A Revolution in Representation?

Insider Perspectives on a Failed Democratic Experiment

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Abstract

The *Movimento Cinque Stelle* (M5S) proposed an original vision of how the representative link could be redesigned. This vision had three key components: the direct, unmediated connection between representatives and their electoral basis; the popular approval and revocability of elected representatives; and the opening of the decision-making process to members of the movement. In this article, we take seriously the conceptions of the initiators and of the activists on the renovation of the representative link, before examining why they failed to materialize in practice. As such, it constitutes a real-life experiment allowing to understand the motivations and difficulties faced by movement parties aiming to renovate political representation. With this exercise of grounded political theory, relying on interviews with M5S activists, we reach the conclusion that if one tries to get rid of the party form before having built an alternative structure capable of aggregating citizens' demands, maintaining a link with activists on the ground over time, while leaving room for a certain degree of internal pluralism, one risks ending up with something worse than traditional parties: a mere sound box, empty on the inside to amplify the voice of the leaders. But we also discover that an alternative, more emancipatory trajectory was possible.

Introduction

Many citizens suspect that representatives are detached from social reality, do not share their concerns and priorities, and mostly care more about the benefits associated with positions of power (Stoker and Hay 2017). In this context, many political parties try to reinvent themselves. Though still the main agents of institutionalized democratic representation, parties face widespread disapproval and are losing active members (Van Biezen et al. 2012). As a result, many of them try to regain popular support by promoting a new, less hierarchical form of party organization (Ignazi 2017; Kitschelt 2006; Scarrow et al. 2017) – the movement – if not a new form of representation. Building on Kitschelt’s seminal work (2006), Borbáth and Paxton (2025) have clarified the definition of movement parties by identifying their three distinctive attributes: their lack of investment in formal organizational party structures (1); their tendency to focus on a small number of policy issues and on specific programmatic appeals (2); and their involvement in contentious action repertoires (3).

Whereas the label “movement party” has been applied to an increasingly broad range of cases, the two authors show empirically that the *Movimento Cinque Stelle* (M5S) in Italy is one of the closest to the ideal-type on each of the three dimensions (organizational, programmatic and protest). It is also one of the most ambitious and electorally successful recent attempts of such movements. The M5S started from almost nothing – a famous comedian and a blog – before its official creation in 2009 to become the first party by voting share after the national elections of 2013 and the main government party in 2018. The causes of this rapid success and ensuing gradual electoral decline have been analyzed in depth (Gerbaudo, 2019; Mosca and Tronconi, 2019; Vittori, 2020a), though mostly from an outsider’s perspective.

In this article, we adopt a different prism. Combining theoretical analysis with insights from the movement’s activists, we reconstruct the democratic vision that motivated their engagement and their perception of what went wrong with the movement. We conceive the M5S as a real-life experiment of a very original attempt to theorize and renovate the representative link. What makes this case particularly interesting is the combination of a genuine alternative vision of representation, the creation of a digital platform to materialize this ambition, and the transformation from a protest party to a governing party. We thus address the following research questions: what was the particular vision of representation that was carried by this movement, how was it perceived by its activists, and why did it fail to materialize in the movement’s internal practices?

Although a lot of work has been produced on intra-party democracy and movement parties in general, and on the M5S in particular, there is value in examining how these ideas were actually implemented and perceived by those involved in the movement, following similar perspectives investigating the cases of Podemos (Mazzolini and Borriello 2022) or La France insoumise (Cervera-Marzal 2024). What activists found attractive in this new vision of representation, what went wrong and how it was experienced from the inside provide testimony of relevance for debates on the alternatives to dominant forms of representation, on the future of the party form and on the comparative merits of different types of party reforms (Gerbaudo, 2019; Scarrow, 2015; Wolkenstein, 2020). More broadly, the example of the M5S informs theoretical debates on internal party democracy and political representation.

The article is structured as follows. Section 1 introduces our empirical material and methodology. Section 2 explains how M5S leaders ambitioned to renew the representative link. Section 3 presents the way in which activists perceived this vision. Section 4 discusses how the promises of the party leadership were actually implemented in practice. The main conclusions are discussed in section 5.

1. Material and methodology

Several researchers have regretted a lack of dialogue between political theory and social sciences, “an estranged couple that belongs together but has grown apart” (Bauböck, 2021). This is especially problematic for studying political representation and political parties, two fields that could benefit greatly from being confronted (Van Biezen and Saward 2008). This article follows the path of recent attempts at remedying this by combining democratic theory with original empirical material (Blumenau et al. 2024; Wolkenstein 2020).¹

It can be seen as an exercise in “grounded political theory” (Ackerly et al. 2024), an approach that intends to compensate for some limitations of isolated abstract theorizing by opening itself to non-academic sources of insights, claims and interests in the construction of normative arguments. It responds to a call to political theorists to engage more with the perspective of the actors and learn from their situated knowledge. An approach grounded in interviews with (ex) activists offers the opportunity to appreciate the democratic project that animated those who got involved in the movement beyond the party leaders, to contrast different visions within the movement and make room for less dominant or defeated voices, to better appreciate the mechanisms of derailment of the project, and to draw better-informed lessons about how it could have been avoided.

Therefore, this article relies on 39 semi-directed interviews with M5S current or former activists conducted in 2022 in two cradles of the movement (Emilia-Romagna and Campania), with diverse profiles in terms of age, gender, level of politicization prior to the movement, political orientation, time of involvement and geographical location. The sample is geographically limited to two regions, but multiple snowball recruitment techniques allowed to explore diversified activists’ networks across urban and rural territories in the two regions reaching saturation of the typical profiles of engagement. As the interviews are retrospective, which carries the risk of post-hoc rationalization, to maximize the diversity of experience and account for the M5S’s decade-long experience at the time of the interviews, we met individuals involved in very different phases of the movement. This allowed us to consider the temporal dimension and to avoid drawing conclusions limited to later-stage activists (see Appendix). During these interviews, the activists talked about their experience within the M5S: the reasons they joined, the practical activities they conducted within the movement, and their assessment of their experience in the M5S and of its evolution. The interviews were fully coded thematically and inductively with the software Nvivo. We refer to these interviews to understand how activists describe the forms taken by the representative link on a day-to-day basis in the movement, and the gap between the expectations of the activists and the actual practices.

¹ A path opened many years ago by Jane Mansbridge (1980).

The fact that the interviews took place more than a decade after the eruption of the movement makes our material particularly relevant for the purpose of this research. Indeed, the M5S went from being a protest movement to a government party. This forced the movement to put to the test the leaders' theoretical vision of representation. Theoretical lessons can be drawn on what kind of renewed version of representation can attract dissatisfied citizens and on the factors that can make such renewal successful or unsuccessful – this being measured both by the Movement's capacity to impose itself as a new, distinctively organized political actor in the long run.

2. The M5S' promise of a renewed representation

The M5S made its breakthrough on the Italian political scene by drawing on a widespread perception of malfunctioning of representative institutions, which has deep roots in Italian political history (Lupo 2013) and was already exploited by a variety of so-called “populist” parties before them (Caiani and Graziano 2016). This breakthrough happened in a context characterized by pervasive anti-politics (Mete 2010) and anti-party sentiment (Lupo 2013), as well as a growing call for “directism” and disintermediation of political parties (Biancalana 2022), as also evidenced by the emergence of personalistic leadership (Musella 2020) in a system historically averse to it (Pasquino 2013). Finally, the blurring of traditional cleavages in the aftermath of the financial and austerity crisis (Mazzolini and Borriello 2018), and the unique traits of its ideology, organization, and communicative style, created the perfect ground for its meteoric rise in the space of a few years, making it an unprecedented case among the Italian parties (Vittori 2020a).

The criticism of existing representative institutions by the founders of the M5S may have been partly opportunistic, but it was not without ground. Few scholars would nowadays deny the elitism of the founding fathers of representative governments, who wanted to minimize citizens' participation between elections (Manin 1997; Przeworski 2010). Nowadays, many countries have evolved towards a more “open” form of representation (Landemore 2020) by offering older and newer participatory and deliberative mechanisms, including rights of petition and initiative, participatory budgeting, citizens' assemblies, referendums and sometimes even recall (Gherghina 2025; Morel and Qvortrup 2020). Nevertheless, elected representatives usually keep a high degree of control over these mechanisms, and many citizens still consider that politicians are not accountable enough (Bowler 2017; Rosset et al. 2017).

This perception was clearly expressed in a speech by Beppe Grillo, the initiator of the M5S: “The person elected can do, ‘what the heck they like’ without having to answer to anyone. Thus, for five years, the parliamentarians live in Eden, in a separate world without obligations, without ties, without having to respect their commitments” (quoted in Mosca 2020). This diagnosis was key to the alternative vision of representation that he and his allies promoted: one in which, for the duration of their mandate, the parliamentarians would remain continuously tied to their base, reminded of their obligations, and forced to respect their commitments.

Although they saw themselves as promoting a *direct* form of democracy, their project is better described as an attempt to renew representation² by getting rid of the main representative structure (the party) and altering the conception of the role, privileges and power of elected representatives (Caruso 2017). The need for representatives was not questioned, but the form usually taken by representation was rejected. There were three key features in their alternative vision of representation, which we describe below before analyzing how these were perceived by M5S' activists and how they were translated into practice within the movement: the direct connection between representatives and their base (1), the capacity to control and recall representatives (2) and citizens' direct participation in decision and law-making (3).

2.1. The direct connection between representatives and their base

The M5S founders felt essential to maintain a constant connection between citizens and representatives to prevent them from becoming detached from those who empowered them. Their vision was reminiscent of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who imagined a system allowing citizens to constantly control their delegates (to executive functions) by making them frequently accountable to popular assemblies (Ghins forthcoming). While the rise of mass politics largely displaced popular assemblies from the democratic imaginary, new technologies seemed to offer the platform making this possible again. The digital setup of the M5S was seen as key to linking the representatives with the represented – first in person through the MeetUp groups and then online, through a digital platform (cf. *infra*). Securing such a direct link between citizens and representatives required breaking with what was perceived as the main obstacle: the party apparatus. In light of the perceived failure of parties to perform their linkage functions (see also Crouch 2004, 70–77; Ignazi 2017; Mair 2013, 87), the founders of the M5S insisted in 2009 on the fact that what they were creating was *not* a party: “the 5-Star Movement is not a political party nor is it intended to become one in the future” (Gerbaudo, 2019, p. 86). Strikingly, other founders of so-called “movements” such as *La France insoumise* or Podemos used very similar expressions and explicitly rejected the party label (Cervera-Marzal 2024). The ambivalence – if not the outright hostility – towards the party form of organization was already previously formulated by various new and established political movements across the ideological spectrum (Borbáth and Paxton 2025; Kitschelt 2006; Muldoon and Rye 2020). Breines (1980) discussed how new left movements (unsuccessfully) sought to avert the iron law of oligarchy by refusing to turn into a political party and by developing new forms of participation. A decade later, Kitschelt opposed established political parties to “new movements” supporting direct participatory forms of organizations (1993).

However, the M5S founders pushed the criticisms further, substantially negating the value of parties as bearers of partisanship and ideological diversity in a pluralist democracy (Chapman 2021; Muirhead and Rosenblum 2020). Intra-party factions and political careerism were seen as reminiscent of traditional parties and as dividing the popular will. Therefore, the ideal invoked at the inception of the Movement was the *vanishing* of the party: “We would like

² Urbinati (2015) speaks about a “direct representative democracy”, where “direct” does not refer to direct participation but to the live broadcasting of representatives’ actions.

parties to radically disappear... and that at the end of this process the Movement would no longer be necessary” (G. Casaleggio, in Mosca, 2020). The promise was that representatives of the Movement would access power and transform the representative system from the inside to make it more directly democratic; a vision reminiscent of communist parties’ promise to use State power to subvert it and contribute to the vanishing of the State in the final stage of socialism. Without explaining how the vanishing process would work in practice, Senator Vito Crimi described the M5S as a “biodegradable party”, “one that, once it had fulfilled its goal of cleaning up Italian politics, would self-destruct” (Gerbaudo, 2019, p. 87).

2.2. *The selection and revocability of elected representatives*

The second key feature in M5S founders’ vision relates to the term used to name their elected representatives: *portavoce*. This suggests that their role consists in carrying the will of the people into the national assembly (Vittori 2020a). To make sure that representatives are aligned with the will of their voters, two related mechanisms seemed necessary. First, the primaries, allowing party members to choose who will compete in elections. Second, the less well-known recall mechanism, allowing them to remove elected representatives from office before the end of their term through a collection of signatures followed by a popular vote (Welp and Whitehead 2020), or at least to expel them from the party if it is not legally permitted to cancel their mandate (as is the case in Italy).

The revocability of elected representatives is a key element of the alternative (“mandate” or “delegate”) vision of representation that has historically been defeated by more elitist understandings of representation (Manin 1997; Pitkin 1967; Urbinati 2006). In contrast with the emphasis on *trust* and *independence*, advocates of the recall (including Rousseau and Marx) saw it as a *safeguard* against risks of misrule or betrayal of electoral promises. The recall affects the nature of representation by empowering citizens through the capacity to hold representatives accountable and responsive beyond the electoral sanction (Wolkenstein and Wratil 2021). It forces them to pay more attention to their popularity and to engage in more efforts to justify their actions. From the perspective of its supporters, the recall symbolically keeps representatives closer to the represented, making it riskier for the latter to do, in Grillo’s words, “what the heck they like”.

Although often associated with the imperative mandate – including by many M5S activists – the recall is analytically distinct, as it is usually not linked to clear instructions given by voters (Leipold 2024a) and does not have a specified trigger mechanism (Egger and Magni-Berton 2020, p. 51). When the recall is dissociated from a strictly imperative mandate, representatives can justify deviations from electoral promises, and take actions that were not part of the initial contract, as long as they maintain a relation of trust and dialogue with the base (Vandamme 2024). In its more general variant, any citizen can initiate a recall procedure and the whole territorial constituency is invited to vote for or against the recall. In its intra-party version, only party members can initiate the recall (or exclusion) of one of their own representatives, and vote on it (White and Ypi 2020). The M5S initiators advocated the former and seemed to allow the latter through the movement’s online platform.

2.3. Citizens' direct participation in decision and law-making

The third key feature of M5S's democratic vision is clear in the founders' discourse that citizens should not "settle for delegation" but "aspire for full participation" (Davide Casaleggio).³ Gerbaudo (2019: 81) described the Movement's ideology as a form of "participationism", or the view that only processes actively engaging ordinary citizens are legitimate. This translated both in the Movement's aspirations for the Italian political system and in its internal organization.

At the level of the political system, the vision included the multiplication of referendums, *without quorum* (in contrast with the prevailing situation in Italy), the right to recall representatives (*cf. supra*) and the obligation for the Parliament to debate citizen initiatives (Fo et al. 2013). Here, the Movement's key originality was the possibility for members to propose laws at different levels of government (Vittori 2020a, Chapter 3) and to participate in various decisions, such as policy orientations, the validation of the program, the selection of candidates, or political alliances through a digital platform (revealingly called "Rousseau"). The platform contained a section "*Lex Iscritti*" giving registered members access to law projects which they could comment on, with an explanation of the goals, the state of the legislation in Italy, and a comparison with legislation in other countries. Slogans of the Movement presented this as a "unique function" and a "first step towards direct democracy", transforming ordinary citizens into co-legislators (Vittori 2020a, p. 110).

3. From grass to grace: activists' expectations for a renewed representation

When examining how M5S activists perceive the three principles of representation mentioned earlier, it becomes evident that they endorse and value them but also display a significantly stronger commitment than the movement's founders to a conception of representation rooted in the pluralist democratic tradition.

3.1. The direct connection between representatives and their base

The activists that we interviewed value a direct relationship personified by a strong presence in the territory and by the ease of getting in touch with MPs and local representatives on a day-to-day basis. The MPs were expected to be easily accessible, accountable, and to provide them detailed and regular reports on their activities. The activists initially saw these practices as evidence that the M5S was different from other traditional political parties. For instance, as Dalila (41, activist since 2018) puts it:

"Another thing that I liked in the movement is that in any case [...] you had the opportunity to speak with your national representatives. I mean, yesterday

³ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZQe5j47GIsk&ab_channel=AmiraLucarelli Davide is the son of the co-founder of the M5S, Gianroberto Casaleggio. He inherited his father's role after his death in 2016.

I had a call with two national representatives [...]. In the other parties, you need to go through a lot of grind before reaching someone that maybe can give you some good hints”.

This direct representative link is based on the idea that political representatives should be treated as equals. The “Uno vale Uno” motto of the M5S is interpreted as a way to assert that the representative is just one of them, should listen carefully to the citizens and act as their spokesperson. Giuliano (48, activist between 2013 and 2018) recalls an anecdote at a party event:

“We did this dinner. [...] At one point B. arrives, she was a senator of the M5S. And she did not have a place to sit. [...]. Imagine how the Movement was back in the day. The MPs in other parties would immediately get a seat. And she was struggling to find one! (*laughing*) And eventually we put her in a corner to eat with someone.”

Equality between representatives and party members, as well as a bond materialized by a strong presence in the territory and by accessible channels of communication symbolize the participatory and transparent conception of representation formed by M5S activists. They do not support the “vanishing” of the party, which they do not talk about, but want the party to be organized around the Meetups at the local level, with the leaders acting as delegates of the base, very differently from the direction that the movement took after 2017 (Crulli 2023).

3.2. The selection and revocability of elected representatives

Just as M5S founders, activists insist on the moral dimension of representation and on the need to control and limit the privileges of elected representatives (Mazzolini and Borriello 2018). When asked why she decided to join the movement, Gioia (67, activist between 2016 and 2021) argues: “I got closer to them because [...] there are some values that need to be followed. Moral, ethical, things like that.”

The mechanism that was supposed to discipline representatives and to avoid this moral betrayal was the recall, supported by most activists, as expressed by Liana (60, activist between 2005 and 2019) and others: “It is fundamental, because you control the elected, they have to be accountable to you.” Some, such as Luisa (65, activist between 2010 and 2020) perceive it as a genuine revolution in the conception of democratic representation: “This idea of entering politics and always being under the judgment of those that elected you, this was a revolution.” Luciano also sees it as revolutionary, yet, to him, it sounds unreal, because it has potentially huge implications: “If we were to [...] judge the politicians in the last thirty years in Naples, the governments would not have lasted more than six months... imagine that!”

Several activists, in line with the contemporary literature (Welp and Whitehead 2020), conceive it as a disciplining threat: “a deterrent”, a “breath on the neck”, or an “element of dissuasion”.

The idea is that the availability of the mechanism could often be enough to encourage appropriate behavior. Another more original argument in favor of the recall has to do with the reduction of partocracy (the excessive dominance of parties in the political system). For Pietro (57, activist since 2018): “we have persons that had a seat in Parliament for 40 years, for which nobody votes. But parties make a list, (...) and therefore they find themselves inside there.” This resonates with the idea that the recall, combined with primaries, would improve the chance of being represented by people enjoying wide popular (or intra-party) support.

Interestingly, the recall is perceived favorably by activists who are also elected representatives, like Paolo (46, activist since 2011 and currently elected) who sees the non-activation of the recall as a confirmation that the representative is doing a good job: “you elect me because I have to represent you. I need to know that I am representing you worthily.” Besides, the threat of recall incentivizes responsible attitudes and realistic electoral promises: for Paolo, “it makes me responsible besides possible errors of assessment, promising what I can more or less deliver on”.

Nevertheless, M5S activists are not blind to the risks and limits of the procedure. Vanessa (57, activist between 2015 and 2020) is worried about the manipulation of opinion by ill-intentioned elites: “it is a double-edged weapon. Because they could accuse a person that did not do these things and brainwash the population, having a candidate removed when it was a good candidate.” Others mention the risk of instrumentalization by elites to throw out an inconvenient representative for “political calculations”. Some, like Carlotta (32, councilor in a small town, activist between 2018 and 2022) mention the time required to carry out policies and the need to adapt to changing circumstances: “One can realize how things actually are (...) and therefore some choices are necessary which are different from the ones taken previously”. This highlights the opposition of some activists to a strictly imperative mandate, even when they support the recall.

In general, activists who support the recall clearly consider it should leave room for justification: as Luisa puts it, “I can even understand a law or a decision that goes against what we had always said. Maybe there are some specific circumstances for which one is constrained to make a certain choice. But you need to explain it.” Like others, Luisa sees the recall within a larger logic of constant interactions and accountability: “a relationship with the base or with those who elected you, a continuous confrontation to explain what is happening.” The recall is thus conceived as a tool incentivizing more recurring interactions between representatives and constituents (Mansbridge 2019).

3.3. Citizens’ direct participation in decision and law-making

M5S activists appear to care about their contribution to the party’s policy agenda by voting on policy issues, drafting law proposals, and sharing experiences on local laws and initiatives in the Rousseau platform. The deliberative and participatory dimensions of the Movement were the core motivation for many activists who joined the M5S in its early days (Bedock and Cappellina 2024). The movement offered the opportunity to scale deliberative participation

from the physical MeetUp groups to the whole movement through participation in the Rousseau platform. Liana explains what she found attractive:

“Not politics done ‘by specialists’. [...] A democracy that included not only participation, but also deliberation, because the M5S proposed to involve the activists on the Rousseau platform and it worked for a while [...]. There was the Lex section, where the members could propose new bills to the elected representatives. And this for me was the highest expression of the democratic process.”

Although some activists with lower IT literacy point out how difficult it was to access and contribute to the platform, for others, the *Lex Iscritti* part of the platform was its most engaging part. Most elected activists appreciated its functions as a core instrument for elaborating bills, circulating norms and practices, coordinating policy proposals, and getting real-time feedback on bills and initiatives beyond their local group. Giovanni (49, activist between 2006 and 2019, former town councilor for M5S) was among the activists pushing for this intensive use of Rousseau:

“After two years of experience within the town council, I proposed that they would let the 1500 scattered M5S councilors use Rousseau as a working tool... because there are so many activities to do. [...] It takes a lot of effort, an organization, an ability to follow things, to follow the proposals you make, etc. [...] Therefore Rousseau became a platform that was quite structured, intelligent and useful, but it has been abandoned.”

This function represented an important facet of the participatory ideal that animated the movement, as well as a necessary mechanism to support the base-connected representation model that was supposed to differentiate the M5S from other Italian parties.

4. A hard landing: a disappointing implementation

The former section showed that although M5S activists embraced the core elements of the founders' vision, they had a more nuanced vision of representation and a clear idea of how it could translate into intra-party practices. The rift between the two worsened over time, as evidenced by the disillusion expressed by many activists involved in very different phases of the movement.

4.1. Losing ground

Several interviewees regret the fact that the initial egalitarian relationship between representatives and activists faded away and that, just as in any other party, MPs started to make the most important decisions in small circles, in particular since the M5S became a government party in 2018. This estrangement is particularly resented as the MPs were initially chosen because they were ordinary citizens without any credentials. Various decisions, such as the

choice not to remain in the opposition in 2018, the alliance with the Democratic Party (PD), the support to Draghi's government or the adoption of the new statutes in 2021 further increased the distance between activists and MPs and were perceived as betrayals and testimonies of the lack of accountability. Lina (49, activist between 2005 and 2019) contrasts this situation with the early days of the movement:

“I [asked] some elected members of the movement, ‘What is happening?’ I mean, we were in Parliament to do other things than that. And the answer they gave me was ‘you guys, you cannot really understand. For us, it is not as simple as when we were in the opposition’. [...] And therefore we understood that we did not know anymore. We would only know what they told us, like for other [parties]. In the M5S, initially, we had online streams for everything. Only for the toilets, we would not turn them on!”

The activists also regret the MPs' physical absence, who spent gradually more time in Rome and less on the ground, as they consider that the constituency should be the privileged place for interaction between the spokespersons and the activists – as in Rousseau's imagined popular assemblies mentioned above. Incentives for the party to support territorial organization are lower in multi-member district systems as the Italian one (Russo 2021), especially in a general framework of declining party membership, reliance on state financing, and starker separation between parties in office and parties on the ground which characterizes the Italian political landscape (Ignazi et al. 2010). More importantly for our case, an organic link with the party on the ground is in stark contrast with Casaleggio's conception that “parties [should] radically disappear”. Because of this rejection of parties by the movement's founders, the Meetups have never received any institutional or financial support and the M5S has never set up a proper organization in the territory. Just as in other movement parties such as *La France insoumise* (LFI, Cervera-Marzal 2024), activities on the ground were entirely dependent on the goodwill, time and money of activists.

Far from defending this organization, many activists consider that the everyday ground activities are an essential part of the representative link. They oppose the M5S leaders who see actions at the local level as “limited to a set of primarily administrative tasks” (Caruso 2017, p. 597) with no strategic autonomy. Activists, on the other hand, were very willing to provide a more meaningful contribution, including the selection of candidates or the elaboration of political programs, through a grassroots organization supported by the center.

Following other prominent cases of movement parties such as Podemos or exhibiting movementist traits such as *La République en marche* (LREM, Cervera-Marzal 2024), the leaders themselves gradually abandoned the fiction of the “non-party”, as illustrated by the evolution of the M5S statutes (Crulli 2023). After long debates, since November 2023, the statutes establish the rules and rights of territorial groups, submitting them to the “unitary political activity of the M5S”.⁴ As in other movement parties such as LFI, the aspiration to horizontality was key for many novice activists to get involved but this promise failed to realize

⁴ <https://2050x.org/m5s/documenti/regolamento-gruppi-territoriali/#1-oggetto-del-presente-regolamento>

in practice (Cervera-Marzal 2024): As Liana summarizes it: “we proposed a reversed pyramid, and eventually we found ourselves with a new pyramid: an apex and a base.”

More broadly, activists believed that formalizing the movement’s organizational structures was inevitable and would simply legitimize the existing reality. Carlotta, recalling her dissatisfaction with how this was handled:

“I am not against a structured organization. [...] Because it’s a fact that although the movement started from below, an organization has always been there. At least, in this way it could be structured and made public. So, you would not have anymore a little boss of the moment, but someone who has a specific mandate.”

Contrary to M5S leaders who reject factions, several activists believe that as different political sensibilities exist within the Movement, it is important to allow for the expression of dissent and conflicts to overcome disagreements. While the leaders have willingly denied the political and cultural differences inside the movement, this stance appears increasingly untenable to activists on the ground, who are aware of their ideological differences and willing to solve disagreements through discussions. Again, similar phenomena were observed in other movement parties such as Podemos (Mazzolini and Borriello 2022), LREM or LFI (Cervera-Marzal 2024; Lefebvre 2022).

4.2. From bottom-up recall to top-down expulsions

Despite the initial praise of the mechanism, the Movement never actively tried to implement external recall once in power. What they proposed through a legislative initiative (later abandoned) was a very specific form of imperative mandate forbidding elected representatives to change party affiliation during their term in office.⁵ This can be justified as a way of ensuring elected representatives’ loyalty to the program with which they were elected, but far from empowering lay citizens, it mostly strengthens party discipline.

The Movement also failed to institutionalize the recall internally. Formally, registered members of the M5S could expel representatives who betrayed the party’s values or commitments. These representatives, however, would keep their seat in Parliament, because the full recall is illegal in Italy. Hence, what was at stake was expulsion from the party, more than recall. On paper, this mechanism seemed to empower party members. Since the entry into Parliament in 2013, many MPs and local representatives have been expelled from the movement for not following the party line. However, these exclusions took place at the discretion of the leaders and not through intra-party, bottom-up recall procedures. In stark opposition to what was initially promised, this constituted a way for party leaders to manage internal dissensus rather than an instrument of empowerment of ground activists. As Francesco (34, activist between 2012 and 2016) explains:

⁵ Pagella Politica, “Il vincolo di mandato non va più di moda”, published on 20 september 2022, Online: <https://pagellapolitica.it/articoli/vincolo-mandato-programmi-elezioni-2022>

“Especially at the beginning there were a lot of MPs who once elected started in a way or another to build their own small internal groups. [...] Any types of excuses were found to kick them out without losing our faces in the media too much. But they were kicked out because they were people that were going against the political direction of the moment [...]. The dissensus was not managed in a constructive way, but in a destructive one.”

In addition to the exclusions, many MPs chose to leave the party because they disagreed with its political line. The activists did not have a say in the decision either. The two extremes – expulsions from above or unilateral exits – meant that in both cases, the link between representatives and the electoral base was broken without space for confrontation.

4.3. From co-legislation to plebiscite

Political participation within the party was large at the beginning, but atomized and centered on ratification rather than on deliberation (Vittori 2020a), and rates of participation declined over time (Mosca 2020). The high cost of Rousseau was questioned by the MPs who were paying for its maintenance, leading to a fracture with its managers, the Casaleggio Associati in 2021, and to a new platform called SkyVote. It did not allow activists to propose their own bills, but just to vote on the leaders’ ones. This episode has been seen as the sunset of the link between activists and spokespersons. According to Luisa:

“[party leaders] just wanted to get rid of this Rousseau platform, which represented the last link with the activists. When it was used well, the bills were proposed in the platform. [...] I would always put [regional bills] in Rousseau to receive those suggestions that, maybe, at times were good, other times were trivial, but still there was a discussion [...] between the activists and the one who was the spokesperson.”

The progressive sidelining of activists’ contributions in the party’s platform had started earlier, however, and echoes the centralization of intra-party dynamics found in comparable parties, such as *La France insoumise*, Syriza or Podemos (Gerbaudo 2021; Lefebvre 2022; Vittori 2022). Activists discussed one feature in particular: the one allowing party leaders to make members vote on policy issues, specific bills, and candidates. While all activists agree that, in theory, participation in substantive decisions was a good principle, many are critical of the implementation of this ideal by the party leaders through the Rousseau and later SkyVote platforms, as Evaristo (58, activist between 2008 and 2021):

“The devices, it is a good thing to have them. It is clear that [...] they have to be used in a proper way. I mean, if I bring into play some questions, and I ask the questions in such a way as to have a plebiscite, I am not using the devices well.”

Besides technical issues, the most consistent criticism revolved around the framing of questions, giving limited alternatives to divert from the party leaders’ positions. The plebiscitary nature was evident in the types of decisions subjected to votes (typically low-polarization issues) and

the influence of party leaders in shaping positions. Two activists report the same episode to exemplify this phenomenon: a new bill modifying the immigration laws, raising prison sentences for illegal immigration crimes, was to be voted on Rousseau while endorsed by M5S leaders. It was the only instance in which their instructions were disavowed by the activists. Francesco considers that votes on Rousseau were: “A bait, [...] a form of legitimization of decisions taken above. In which, questions badly phrased or anyway conditioning respondents, are later legitimized with more or less distorted votes.” Paolo doubles down, remembering how, after this specific episode, the party leaders stopped proposing new votes for a long period:

“This drove Casaleggio mad, this is well known. [...] You have to remember that afterwards, for two years, we did not vote on anything! Nothing! And later we started again voting little by little with that system that asked [meaningless questions as] ‘do you love your mother?’”

Overall, the promise of making citizens co-legislators was not honored. Online participation remained weak in substance. M5S activists were initially granted the ability to write initiatives and to vote on various issues. However, the parliamentary group exercised a screening procedure to make sure that party members’ initiatives followed the party line (Mosca 2020) and only a few bills directly emerged from member proposals (Deseriis and Vittori 2019, p. 5699), even though the legislative agenda of M5S representatives got gradually closer to that of the activists (Mosca and Vittori 2023).

5. Lessons from a failed experiment

The alternative vision of representation emerging from our interviews with M5S activists forms an original syncretism of older and newer theoretical conceptions of democratic representation. First, the mandate conception of representation, historically defended by Rousseau, radical republicans, and parts of the socialist movement including Marx himself (Ghins forthcoming; Leipold 2024b; Pitkin 1967, Chapter 7), in which the representative is essentially a spokesperson, a delegate, with little room for maneuver without instructions from the base, to which they remain bounded and accountable. Second, the “recursive” form of representation conceptualized by Mansbridge (2019), which is characterized by constant deliberative interactions between representatives and their constituents. This was needed since party members recognized that instructions could not be given once and for all. In a way, the interviewed M5S activists were less radical and more pragmatic than the Movement’s founders, supporting a genuinely recursive form of representation instead of a totally controlled delegation process. Third, elements of the “liquid” form of democracy recently put forward by Pirate parties and some democratic theorists (Blum and Zuber 2016; Landemore 2020; Valsangiacomo 2022), in which citizens can continuously decide either to let their (revocable) representatives make decisions in their name, or to legislate by themselves (through the party platform). This is a new understanding of representation, compared to Rousseau’s vision for example, with digital platforms replacing the popular assemblies of ancient times and allowing for different forms and degrees of citizen involvement.

The aspiration to radically reform the political process animated leaders and activists alike, though with some differences. Yet, the promised revolution has not occurred. As observed in other movement parties, the leaders and delegates lost their initial connection with the base, and the formal opportunities for online participation did not empower party members (Cervera-Marzal 2024; Lefebvre 2022; Mazzolini and Borriello 2022; Vittori 2022). The M5S has been aptly described as a “plebiscitarian movement party, i.e., a political party with weak intermediate structures and porous membership coupled with a resourceful leadership, which controls the main aspects of the party organization” (Vittori 2021). What we seem to witness in this respect is the old hierarchical party structure dressed in new – technological – clothes. This finding clearly echoes the conclusion of Cervera-Marzal on “movementist parties” (2024, p. 40) : “[they] claim to be more democratic than the old parties, but in reality they often operate in a centralised way that reinforces the founder-leader’s authority to the detriment of the activist base, which is deprived of the prerogatives it had in the traditional parties”. Comparing various emblematic movement parties, Vittori (2022) notes that they feature a combination of plebiscitarian intra-party democracy and party leadership empowerment. This plebiscitarian tendency applies both to movement parties that have explicitly valued efficiency over democracy since their creation, such as LFI (Cervera-Marzal 2024) but also to organizations such as Podemos or the M5S that relied on a more participatory and bottom-up conception of democracy in their early days (Lisi 2019; Mazzolini and Borriello 2022).

This development is not a fatality: for all its other limitations, the short-lived Agora party in Belgium, which was strongly bottom-up – instead of merely claiming to be so – largely managed to avoid elite capture (Junius and Matthieu 2023). Its failure to survive in the long run was due to its untenable single-issue nature (its only agenda was implementing citizens’ assemblies) rather than to an oligarchic transformation. The same may hold for Pirate parties (Voda and Vodová 2025) and, more generally, “networked parties” (Deseriis 2020), which are created bottom-up, maintain a horizontal and partly decentralized structure, and in which actual, in-person deliberation coexists with digital tools. A first conclusion, then, is that a genuine renewal of the party structure and representative link is more likely to occur in depersonalized movements initiated by activists than in very personalized movements (Lefebvre 2022) created by a charismatic leader or a few people instrumentalizing demands for democratic renewal to achieve electoral success.⁶ Although many activists were attracted to the M5S by the promise of the first form, the movement seems best characterized by the second.

Despite the partial failure⁷ of the M5S – its failure to revolutionize the representative link – there are other interesting lessons to be drawn from this experiment. The more positive lesson is that a less elitist and more interactive vision of representation has the potential to motivate people to get involved in a political movement, as our interviews illustrate, and to attract votes,

⁶ Whether depersonalized political movements have a chance to be successful in elections is the other consideration to bring in the balance.

⁷ This partial failure coexists with some successes of the Movement: the ability to involve new people in politics, noticeably younger and women; the high public visibility given to the issue of the improvement of the representative link; and policy achievements including the introduction of a guaranteed minimum income in 2019 (with all its limitations, compared to the basic income initially advocated).

as the initial electoral successes of the M5S testify. Furthermore, the interviews show that this is compatible with a balanced and realistic view of participatory mechanisms, the need for internal structure and the value of partisan organization – a subtle vision contrasting with the caricatural depiction of parties and representation in the founders’ discourses. The skeptics might argue that the promised revolution was a pure deception, but our interviews reveal that things could have turned out differently, for instance by reinforcing the deliberative features of the platform or by giving resources to the party on the ground. Choices made by the party elites largely conditioned the failure to revolutionize the representative link.

Another important lesson is that calls for changes in the representative link should be reflected in party rules. In a digital movement party, the devolution of power must be translated into the very software (Deseriis and Vittori 2019). For instance, the intra-party recall (or a related expulsion mechanism) should not be activated by party elites, but by coalescing party members. This coalition requirement, facilitating joint action such as the collection of signatures to launch a recall procedure, requires appropriate technological design and procedures. Besides, participation should not be reduced to voting, otherwise there is just too much power for those setting the agenda. Our interviews reveal the willingness of activists to engage in intra-party deliberation, resonating with findings in other contexts (Wolkenstein 2020: Chapter 3). Even their support for the recall can be interpreted as a way of incentivizing accountability, understood as a process of mutual justification.

It is only by meeting these conditions (a more egalitarian design of the digital platform and space for genuine deliberation), and possibly others, that the participatory tools made possible by the digital transformation of political parties could amount to genuine forms of popular empowerment, and turn them into proper agents of popular sovereignty (Wolkenstein 2020). If institutional rules do not constrain the action of leaders and if one relies too much on their goodwill, any movement runs a high risk of following the historical trajectory of all mass political parties – a synthesis lucidly made by Francesco:

“We lived the typical party dynamics [...] from a bottom-up party position but condensed in a few years. I have really seen all the parade of a, let’s say, Communist party, condensed in three, four years. To end up becoming a party like any other, which surely has some values, good values even, but that is blocked by a machine and some dynamics in which it has decided to get involved, as so many other parties that started with all the good intentions and ended up in the same situation.”

Another interesting lesson from our interviews is that the rejection of the party form runs a high risk of creating an inability to connect the representatives with their territories, as noted by other authors (Cervera-Marzal 2024; Mazzolini and Borriello 2022). Despite all their failures, one of the strengths of mainstream parties is their territorial grounding. Those who want to transform the party form must find a functionally equivalent way of keeping this connection with the territories, and it does not seem that a digital platform, on its own, can achieve this. Besides, the interviews revealed that the visions of parties and representation by the party leaders on one side, and by M5S activists on the other, were different. Grillo despised intermediary bodies and internal factions (Urbinati 2015). Activists rejected only the elitism of “politics done in Rome”,

favoring the direct relationship of the represented with their territory. Intra-party pluralism was not the evil to fight; but a necessity to enable true deliberation. One could conclude that to sustain the engagement of party members and avoid turning into another elected aristocracy, there is a need for a space of intra-party deliberation, a link to the territory and mechanisms to deal with internal pluralism. This could take a plurality of forms. We could imagine policy-oriented fora (Wolkenstein 2020: 54) in which randomly selected party members would draft a party stance on a particular issue, to be ratified through an online vote; and open local party assemblies, where representatives would answer questions and hear suggestions from party sympathizers. A credible threat of intra-party recall would incentivize representatives to take this very seriously. Finally, a right of intra-party initiative could be institutionalized within the party through digital tools: for example, an open-source digital platform could allow party members to launch a collective online deliberation on a topic and come up with a proposal to be ratified by all members, which should be endorsed by party leaders in case of ratification.

The most general lesson is that if one tries to get rid of the party form before having built an alternative structure capable of aggregating citizens' demands, maintaining a link with activists on the ground over time, while leaving room for a certain degree of internal pluralism, one risks ending up with something worse than traditional parties: a mere sound box, empty on the inside to amplify the voice of the leaders. In other words, the iron law of oligarchy, but without the space for pluralism and conflict that traditional parties provide to some extent. This is not a fatality, however. Our interviews offer an interesting counter-perspective: what motivates participation is not the utopian dream of a pure direct democracy allowed by the vanishing of parties, but the aspiration to a renewed intermediary body in which delegation would not entail disconnection and with genuine opportunities for input, deliberation and control for activists.

While a few decades of intra-party democracy have not yet shown evidence of its capacity to genuinely empower citizens (Pilet and Cross 2014) or reconcile citizens with the party form (Ignazi 2017), there is still room for further experimentation, and many interesting lessons to draw from the perspective of ordinary activists who have experienced new forms of party organization, maybe particularly when they have failed.

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